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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TUNIS 000699

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STATE FOR NEA/FO (GRAY) AND NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)
NSC FOR ABRAMS

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SUBJECT: BEN ALI TOUR D'HORIZON WITH CODEL TANNER

REF: TUNIS 698

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) In a meeting May 31 with Congressman John Tanner (D-TN) and nine other Representatives, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali emphasized his commitment to close ties with the United States. He also:

- asked for more US economic engagement;
- insisted the ruling political party is too strong, and that he is working to weaken it;
- criticized China for its actions in the region;
- warned Iran poses a danger, and must not get a nuclear weapon;
- said the United States "cannot leave Iraq defeated;"
- opined that a solution between Israel and the Palestinians must wait for the departure of Hamas; and
- said Tunisia would support any solution to the Israel-Palestinian situation the United States could suggest.

¶2. (C) The congressmen underscored the excellent relations between the United States and Tunisia, and said they were in Tunis to listen. After the meeting, several representatives said they were impressed by Ben Ali's vigor and openness.
End summary.

Ben Ali meets CODEL Tanner

¶3. (SBU) President Ben Ali met for almost 90 minutes on May 31 with the congressional delegation led by Congressman John Tanner (D-TN). Participants were:

Rep. Paul Gillmor (R-OH)
Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO)
Rep. John Shimkus (R-IL)
Rep. Dennis Moore (R-KS)
Rep. John Boozman (R-AR)
Rep. Baron Hill (D-IN)
Rep. Albert Chandler (D-KY)
Rep. Charles Melacon (D-LA)
Ambassador Robert F. Godec

During the meeting, the President spoke mostly in Arabic, with interpretation provided by the Director of Tunisia's External Communications Agency (ATCE), Oussama Romdhani.

Relations: Good, but more economic engagement, please

¶4. (C) Ben Ali warmly welcomed the CODEL, noting that the United States and Tunisia "share the same values and principles." Chairman Tanner replied that the delegation had received a "heart-warming" reception. He added the delegation was impressed with Tunisia's economic progress, and that "we appreciate your leadership in this area." He underscored the delegation was in Tunis to listen. Congressman Gillmor emphasized the good relations between Tunisia and the United States, noting our cooperation on key challenges, including security. He asked how the delegation might further strengthen US-Tunisian ties.

¶5. (C) Ben Ali responded that US-Tunisian political relations are "outstanding." The congressional visit is a "token" of this "special friendship." Trade and business relations, however, are not at the same level, describing them as "modest." He added that while the United States is establishing a military command in Africa, China is active offering easy loans and investments.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador responded that US-Tunisian relations are very good, but agreed more could be done to strengthen economic bonds. He said he had discussed economic relations with several GOT ministers (including Minister Jouini), US officials and business representatives. The Embassy is working, he added, to bring a US trade and investment mission to Tunisia, and had raised with Washington the possibility of economic discussions. Opportunities for commercial relations, the Ambassador said, would be improved if Tunisia took additional steps, for example, permitted franchising. Ben Ali responded emphatically that Tunisia wants stronger economic ties and would "reciprocate entirely."

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Political: "Let me share a secret..."

¶7. (C) The President turned to political matters, emphasizing the "political process has to move on" in Tunisia. It is "our most daunting task," he said, and the big challenge is to "change mind sets." He reviewed Tunisia's political progress, including the presence of opposition parties and women in Parliament. Ben Ali noted that while an occasional "abuse" may happen, it "does not determine whether we are making progress." He added Tunisia is taking steps in many areas, citing the schools in remote villages, home ownership levels and the right to vote. These, too, are the basis for freedom and democracy.

¶8. (C) Ben Ali continued: "Let me share a secret, I want to weaken the ruling party." He said the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) is too strong, and that he wants to strengthen the opposition parties. Congressman Tanner responded that the President's remarks were "most enlightening" and promised to take them back to Washington.

Terrorism: Vigilant against extremists

¶9. (C) Responding to a question on terrorism from Congressman Tanner, Ben Ali emphasized his own long fight against it. He detailed his proposal for an international conference and code of conduct. He complained that Rachid Ghannouchi (the leader of the banned an-Nahdha party) had been responsible for bombings in the 1980s, but was now living in London. Regionally, he said fundamentalists had chosen in the 1990s to target North Africa, and began in Algeria because of its size and oil riches. He added there is still a threat coming from Algeria, and from Libya.

¶10. (C) The reasons for terrorism are diverse, according to

Ben Ali. They include the extremist religious discourse, economic problems, programming on satellite television, and developments in Iraq and the Palestinian territories. Tunisia, he added, is "vigilant" not to allow "elements" to go to Iraq or Palestine. It is, he said, "our duty."

Regional: "Neither China nor Iran care much for the Arab world"

¶11. (C) Congressman Moore asked for Ben Ali,s assessment of Iran. The President responded that he sees two dangers in the region. The first, he said, is China, adding that he had read a book 40 years ago entitled the "Yellow Peril." "Today," Ben Ali said, "we see it happening." The second danger is Iran. Ben Ali said, "While I don,t want to accuse the United States of intentionally helping Iran, that is what your policies did."

¶12. (C) Ben Ali said there is a Shia trend across the Gulf region, the Levant and the entire Arab world. This trend, he said, poses a danger. He added, "Neither China nor Iran care much for the Arab world." Ben Ali continued, "If Iran gets a nuclear weapon then it will pose a very grave danger." He said the Iranian government had sent a special envoy to reassure Tunisia that its development of nuclear power was entirely peaceful. "I admonished him," Ben Ali said, by asking how Iran could talk about the peaceful development of nuclear power when at the same time saying Israel should disappear from the face of the earth. The congressmen warmly welcomed Ben Ali,s views on Iran.

Iraq: "US cannot leave Iraq defeated"

¶13. (C) Congressman Chandler asked for Ben Ali,s assessment of Iraq. The President replied while Saddam Hussein had been a despot, Tunisia had opposed the decision to remove him by force. Iraq, he said, will now become a Shia nation, possibly an anti-American Shia nation. Moreover, the current conflict could easily spread from Iraq to its neighbors and the United States should not expect the situation to stabilize anytime soon. The current Iraqi government is not, Ben Ali said, totally representative and is not fulfilling the aspirations of the Iraqi people. He also expressed concern about the declining US public support for the war in Iraq.

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¶14. (C) Despite the many challenges and complexities, Ben Ali forcefully said the United States "should not pick up its luggage and go" and "cannot leave Iraq defeated." The United States, he said, must ensure a level of stability in Iraq.

Palestine: "We must wait for the departure of Hamas"

¶15. (C) At the request of Congressman Gillmor, Ben Ali reviewed Tunisia,s views on the Palestinians and Israel. After noting Tunisia,s role in the first talks between Israel and the Palestinians, Ben Ali said the situation has become even more difficult in recent years. It was a "mistake," he said, to allow Hamas to enter the Palestinian government. With Yasser Arafat, a solution could have been found, said Ben Ali, and indeed, almost was.

¶16. (C) Peace, however, with Hamas is not possible, Ben Ali said. How can there be a solution with someone who does not recognize Israel,s right to exist? The only answer is that, "We must wait for the departure of Hamas." He added, however, that the United States has a continuing role to play in settling this problem. He concluQd: any solution the

United States can suggest, Tunisia pledges to support it.

Wrap Up: Djerba Pilgrimage

¶17. (C) Congressman Tanner closed by saying that the meeting with the President reaffirmed the strong, long-lasting friendship between the United States and Tunisia. The session, he said, had been most enlightening and reaffirmed the delegation's decision to come to Tunisia.

¶18. (C) President Ben Ali concluded by noting Tunisia's commitment to co-existence and security in the region. This commitment was demonstrated, he said, by the recent pilgrimage of thousands of Jews to the Tunisian island of Djerba, home of an ancient Jewish synagogue. During the event, there was "no difference" between Jews and Muslims on the island. It was, he said, a model for the region. He concluded he was pleased and honored by the congressional visit.

Bio notes

¶19. (C) Throughout the conversation, Ben Ali was vigorous, open and engaged. Despite the rumors regarding Ben Ali's poor health, he showed no outward sign of illness during the session. On several occasions, he interjected words and even phrases in English. He clearly understood at least some of what the congressmen said in English. Romdhani later commented to the Ambassador that Ben Ali does, in fact, understand English, sometimes making his role as interpreter difficult.

Comment

¶20. (C) Ben Ali's performance was strong and well-received. It was remarkable that the President offered so much time (almost ninety minutes) to the delegation. Afterward, two of the congressmen said that it was the most impressive meeting they have had with a head of state. The delegation found Ben Ali's remarks on regional issues, notably Iran and Palestine, welcome. Even on Iraq, the congressmen appreciated the President's analysis. Ben Ali's strongly negative remarks on China were more surprising. Although he did not say so specifically, they were probably partly the result of Chinese economic competition and the recent departure from Tunisia of some manufacturing firms for lower-cost China.

¶21. (C) On the political front, Ben Ali, clearly anticipating questions on Tunisia's lack of progress, turned aside the issue with his forceful explanation of his commitment to further liberalization, even though it did not reflect reality on the ground. In contrast, his vocal support for deepening economic and commercial relations is new and can be used to further US economic goals in Tunisia. We should follow up on this opening with a visit from an interagency economic delegation, which could pave the way for a third TIFA Council meeting later in the year.

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¶22. (C) Overall, Ben Ali's vigor and seeming openness impressed the congressional delegation. In brief press remarks at end of the meeting, Chairman Tanner said that he found Ben Ali's comments to be encouraging. He added that it was clear the United States and Tunisia share many values and that he would be sure to share the President's comments with other officials in Washington. Tanner's statement was broadcast on Tunisian television (Tunis 7) national news the same evening.

123. (SBU) CODEL Tanner did not clear this message.
GODEC